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A SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. PRACTICING THE METHOD OF VIRTUAL CROSS- CULTURAL INTERACTION: INNOVATION OR ROUTINE?

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Abstract. *The current situation in the global arena may be characterized as a rapidly changing process with new trends appearing. This situation is not a problem for the young generation which has many different names, such as the “Net Generation”, “Digital Natives”, “Y” and/or “X” Generation, etc. As a matter of fact, these modern names are closely associated with high consumption of virtual media, such as the Internet. A great majority of young individuals perceive their own existence mainly in the virtual space. Thus, the modern approach to communication demonstrated by the young generation cannot be refuted by any educational institution or governmental body which are involved in various processes of policy creation and regulation of modern societal norms. The educational system can be referred to as a priority in the entire world, because newly educated and trained specialists take an active part in the processes of economic, political, education, etc. development aiming to create a positive image of their country in the world. Multilingualism is part of the daily life due to the provided ability to communicate at an international level. New opportunities, such as travelling or jobs and studies abroad, expand people's horizons and demand new skills. A second language is a must in the contemporary world. Language acquisition is more efficient when innovations are integrated into the educational field. This article aims at revealing the methods of practice of virtual cross-cultural interaction facilitating the acquisition and development of the foreign language communication skills. The conducted survey suggests that virtual cross-cultural interaction is an innovative routine acknowledged by every respondent, and all the positive aspects are clearly and indisputably presented by the survey participants.*

Keywords: *second language acquisition, virtual cross-cultural interaction, social networks.*

Introduction

The 21st century may be characterized by an enormous amount of information and a fast pace of new developments. Preparation of student for future life is a complex process that includes the transfer of knowledge, specific abilities, and generic skills. The objective of teacher is to create or develop a portfolio of a successful professional who would be able to adapt to, and to be competitive in, the modern society.

Currently, the study process has been closely related to the application of innovative devices or methods which can make the learning process more student-oriented and much more engaging and attractive. Traditional methods of a second language acquisition tend to be combined with innovations, such as the usage of multimedia, smartphones, Internet, interactive activities, etc. These tools and devices help teachers to provide advanced materials to their students who thus can get a larger amount of information in a contemporary way. Based on that, the author argues that innovations make a great impact on the new versions of the communication process. Interaction of people is promoted by the use of the Internet which expands the network of communicating individuals. The Internet provides a possibility to download and use various social networks for diverse purposes, with communication being the key one. Social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) unite people of different countries in the entire world. Thus, there are no more obstacles to reach friends or interested people in any distant region of the world. If the communication and its boundaries are expanded, can it be beneficial for students and the process of studies? Everybody knows that the acquisition of languages makes a positive impact on the future career opportunities, on the preparation for professional activities, and the development of personality. Well-educated individuals may be referred to as “global” citizens who demonstrate a positive attitude to representatives of various cultures. The presented concepts of culture, language, and communication are closely interlinked, and this combination may be a well-organized educational tool for different level students learning a second language. The **problem** is formulated as follows: is the acquisition of a second language through the method of virtual cross-cultural interaction an innovative method or a daily routine? The article aims at disclosing the educational links between the phenomenon of culture and the communication process and, respectively, their benefit for a second language acquisition through virtual cross-cultural interaction. The **object** is to analyze the second language acquisition through the method of virtual cross-cultural interaction. The **tasks** to achieve the objective include: 1) a review of the use of social networks in the learning environment; 2) an analysis of the possibilities to acquire a second language through the method of virtual cross-cultural interaction; 3) the disclosure of an educational aspect of the use of social networks through students’ prism.

Methods: content analysis, theoretical analysis, survey, descriptive analysis.

Going from traditional to innovative in a second language acquisition

A second language and the advantages provided by it have been lately emphasized and analyzed rather intensively; moreover, the knowledge of languages plays a key role in the global business, communication, and cross-

cultural environment. Teacher should know student's attitude to foreign languages and their willingness to improve in that area. Currently, teachers act as mediators between information sources and students, and they also are expected to find and apply the latest and the most relevant tools and methods in order to meet the needs of students and the modern society.

The basic understanding of the concept of *method* contains rational investigation/learning and a way of development, used for educational purposes in the studies of different subjects. Various scholars provide different interpretations of the concept and the entire process. Šernas (1995) defines a method as the totality of practical and theoretical operations used to perceive reality; it may be understood as a way of acting, as the rules and an appropriate order of activities used to achieve any educational aim or goal of learner or teacher. Gage, Berliner (1994) define a method as a model of repetitive actions of a learner that can be incorporated into the learning and/or teaching of different subjects and used by various teachers. Any educational model or a system of activities is implemented through various educational tools. Currently, the traditional methods and/or tools have been supplemented, or slightly modified, by means of innovations and technologies.

The traditional methods of a second language acquisition comprise the traditional learning environment (rooms/classrooms) with various course books, workbooks, dictionaries, etc. The question arises whether that is enough for the 'digital' generation. Young people have already got used to being interactive and to using technologies wherever and whenever they need or want. The basic principle of the contemporary life is 'to be online'. For that reason, both the educational system and teachers have to be ready to respond to the new needs. A review of the traditional methods is presented by Renau (2016) in the article *A Review of the Traditional and Current Language Teaching Methods*. The most popular traditional methods include the Grammar-Translation Method (introduced in 1840), the Audio-lingual Method (1950s), the Structural Approach (1971), Communicative Language Teaching (the late 1960s), Suggestopedia (1978), the Silent Way (1972), Community Language Learning (1972), and the Natural Approach (in 1983), including such conventional activities as speaking, reading, translating, asking questions, listening, writing, creating dialogues, doing role plays, etc., which are no longer sufficient for modern advanced studies. However, despite an innovative approach to the study process, the importance of the traditional methods cannot be totally denied, as proved by educationalists, such as Nunan (1991), Chomsky (1966), Curran (1972), Gattegno (1972), Krashen and Terrel (1983), Lozanov (1978), Menon and Patel (1971), because, to quote Nunan (1991), "...there will never be a method for all".

Upon analyzing the core of the problem and the possibility to acquire a second language, the following newly originated approaches and methods can be

named: simulations, projects, 'Tandem', portfolio, virtual learning environments, interactive activities/games, innovative tools (interactive boards, tables, tablet computers), as well as technology-integrated lessons, neuro-programming, coaching, etc. Trends have changed and, according to Motteram (2013), it is possible to meet a new breed of teachers-technologists. Course books and traditional activities have become strange to students, because teachers have already been making use of the new technologies (multimedia, tablet computers, iPads, smartphones, and the Internet) and increasingly integrating them into class activities. The above named innovations enable students to work and practice in a real environment with real people and in real life situations. The learning environment seems to have transformed into live learning sessions or chat forums. Practicing new methods and using innovative tools might be a challenge for teachers and their computer literacy skills. If a teacher faces technical difficulties or experiences a lack of proficiency in the field of technologies, these innovations can be hardly applied successfully and beneficially. Despite that, each participant of the study process should develop their own competences and move forward step by step. Innovative methods and tools enable teachers to take into consideration and to respond to the needs of learners, to manage the system of knowledge acquisition, and to adapt teaching methods to certain situations. The students are unique and have individual needs; therefore, multiple tools and methods provide flexibility and accessibility to every single learner, given their learning pace, autonomy, and personal characteristics.

Moving away from the aforementioned traditional methods and tools used for a second language acquisition has not been straightforward due to the pace of development of teachers' qualifications and their attitude to innovations. Such a situation calls for the modification of the entire study process, so that students could be provided with updated knowledge, and the innovative tools could be used for efficient collaboration. The study process has to be updated, upgraded, and made diverse and attractive for learner. To date, the traditional tools, such as course books, grammar books, workbooks, and notebooks have still been used by students in the learning process. However, innovative and globally used technologies provide more possibilities for students and upgrade the learning/teaching process in the conventional environment. The most popular example of using technologies in the lessons of foreign languages is computer application in language learning (CALL). Typically, teachers can use a computer with additional tools, such as CDs, DVDs, CD-ROMs, multimedia, and the Internet. Newly originated methods and tools can be used for new methods of teaching and learning, for making presentations, getting feedback, or for preparation of interactive tests. Information Communication Technology (ICT) penetrates into various spheres of our existence and brings positive changes in

education. According to Glosiene (2006), current technologies create a 'digital' competence, and this competence empowers teacher or student to manage knowledge more efficiently and to process increasingly large amounts of new information.

According to Sharma and Barrett (2007), students have been lately referred to as 'digital natives' or the 'net generation', as they are closely familiar with the information and communication technology which has become part of their leisure time. For this reason, educational technologies emerged and were integrated into the learning process, thus enabling students to benefit twice, i.e. to spend their time online and to perform some educational activities related to a second language acquisition. The virtual learning environment contributes to the differentiation of learning levels and provides each learner with flexibility and with access to necessary sources.

A second language acquisition through virtual cross-cultural interaction

The authors focus on the connection between a second language acquisition and virtual cross-cultural communication which is a routine action in the daily life of young people. Such a method of communication is practiced via different types of social networks which have huge audiences of users in various countries of the world. The communication process cannot be denied or restricted, because we are social individuals, and therefore the satisfaction of the need for communication is the basis of our existence. Through communication, we transfer knowledge and facts about our culture and the cultural factors representing our lifestyle, attitudes, religion, economics, politics, customs, traditions, etc. If the communication process includes people from different cultures, it may develop in any foreign language. Consequently, beside the transfer of knowledge, a second language skills are acquired, developed, or even mastered, through cultural exchange. Levy (2007) emphasized that because of coming to know a culture – its products, practices, and perspectives – through language, the culture is meant to be the central focus of the second language teaching. Social networks and their access are available for everyone due to widely used mobile and web-based technologies; furthermore, highly interactive platforms have been created via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify the user-generated content. Scholars, such as Kietzmann et.al. (2011), presented seven blocks of social media which explain the benefits of the social networks usage in a second language acquisition context. Currently, more than 145 million users send on average 90 million 'tweets' per day, each consisting of 140 (or fewer) characters (Madway, 2010). These are mostly short status updates of what users are doing, where they are, how they feel, or connect to other sites. This fact represents the undisputable evidence of the frequency of social networks usage in daily life.

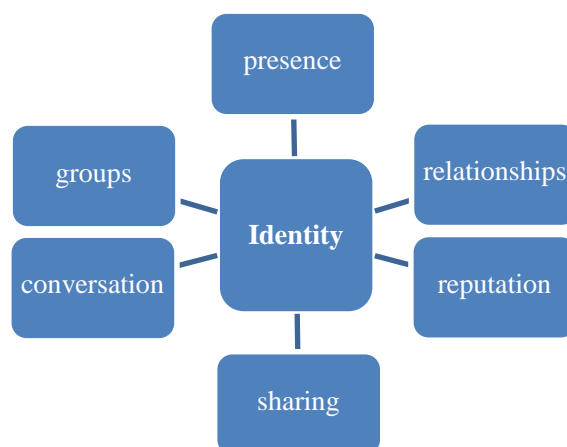


Figure 1. **Functionality of social media** (Kietzmann et al., 2011)

The functions of social networks demonstrate comprehensive involvement of individuals into the activity of any social network. The basic functions, such as as ‘conversation’ and ‘sharing’, confirm that such relationships call for foreign language skills and, if the communication is cross-cultural, a second language skills will be definitely developed. The ‘identity’ factor is important for identifying one’s own personality and representing the local/native culture, as well as its basic factors which have to create a positive image of the user’s country. Depending on the positive image, the relationships among groups or separate individuals will be established, and further relationships will be encouraged and continued.

The in-depth analysis of virtual cross-cultural interaction via various social networks may be used for educational purposes, and such an innovative method can be efficient in the process of a second language acquisition. The frequency of ‘tweeting’ is a significant evidence of its being a permanent daily activity that involves almost each member of our society.

Educational aspect of social networks usage through the students’ prism

On reviewing the situation of innovative methods, the integration of various tools into the traditional methods of a second language acquisition, and the efficiency of cross-cultural interaction through social networks, the survey was conducted with the aim of revealing students' attitude to a second language acquisition by means of the method of virtual cross-cultural interaction through social networks. The target group consisted of 87 Klaipeda University (KU) students. The data aimed to disclose the respondents' attitude to virtual cross-cultural interaction via social networks and its relation to a second language acquisition.

The respondents were asked to indicate if they used social networks for cross-cultural interaction in their daily life (see Fig.2).

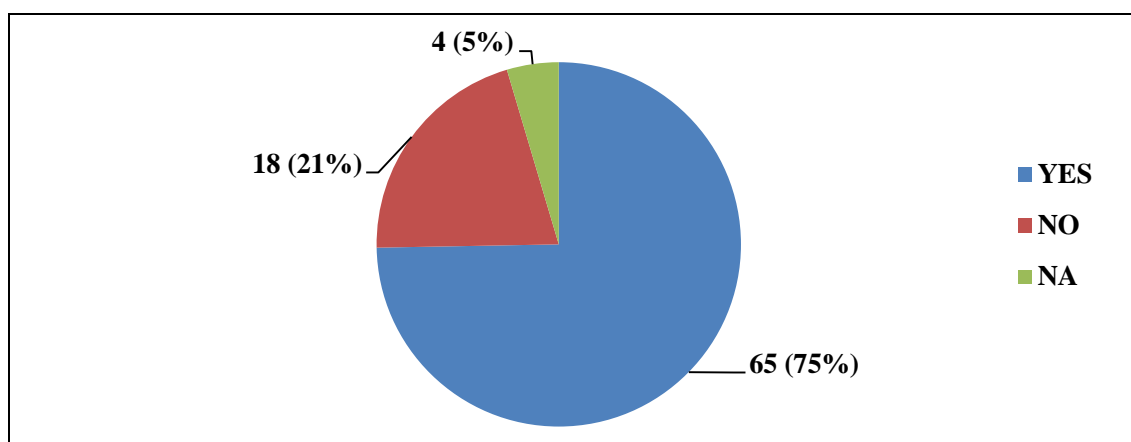


Figure 2. **Social networks usage for virtual cross-cultural interaction**

The obtained data witnessed that 65 (75 %) of the respondents used social networks for cross-cultural interaction in their everyday life. A significantly smaller amount of the respondents, i.e. 18 (21 %) indicated that social networks were not part of their everyday activities, and just 4 respondents (5 %) did not provide their answers.

To summarise the results, it is obvious that the students are interested and involved in the interaction process via social networks and demonstrate positive attitude to the possibility to establish relationships and continue them via virtual cross-cultural interaction

In further analysis of the issue, a question about the participation in social networks was asked. The respondents were asked to name the social networks they used for virtual interaction.

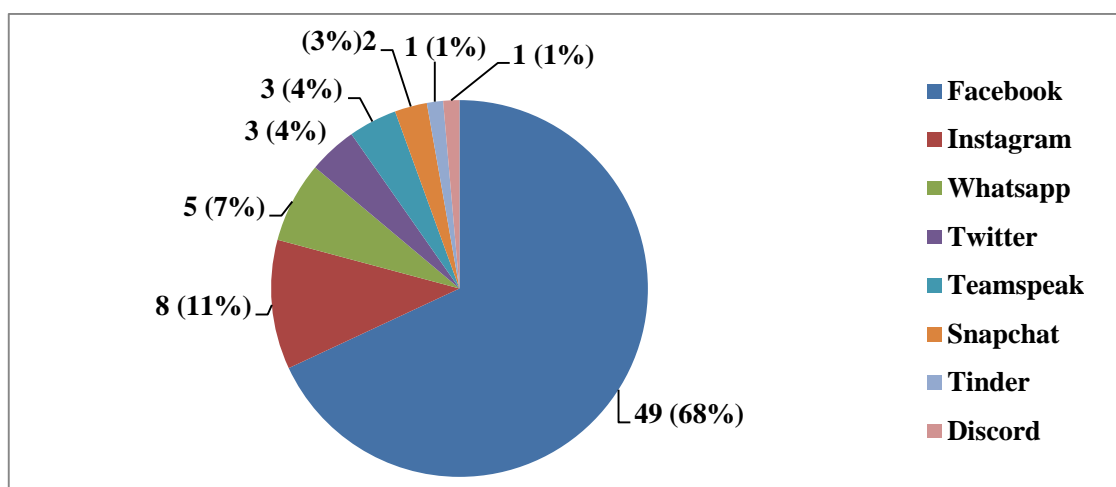


Figure 3. **Social networks used for virtual cross-cultural interaction**

The results of the survey revealed a vast diversity of social networks used for virtual cross-cultural interaction. The most popular was Facebook, indicated by 49 respondents (68 %). A considerably smaller percentage of the respondents (11 %) named Instagram; 7 %, Whatsapp; 4 % of the interviewed students indicated Twitter and Teamspeak, and approximately the same number of the respondents named Snapchat (2 %), Tinder (1 %), and Discord (1 %).

The variety of social networks named by the respondents demonstrated intensive virtual interaction across the world, because those networks were global. The globality of cross-cultural interaction illustrated the necessity of using foreign languages, which may be the key reason for a second language acquisition or the development of foreign language skills.

In order to disclose and analyze the necessity of a second language acquisition through virtual cross-cultural interaction, the respondents named a number of countries of the world they have been communicating with; some of them were represented as grouped (see Fig. 4).

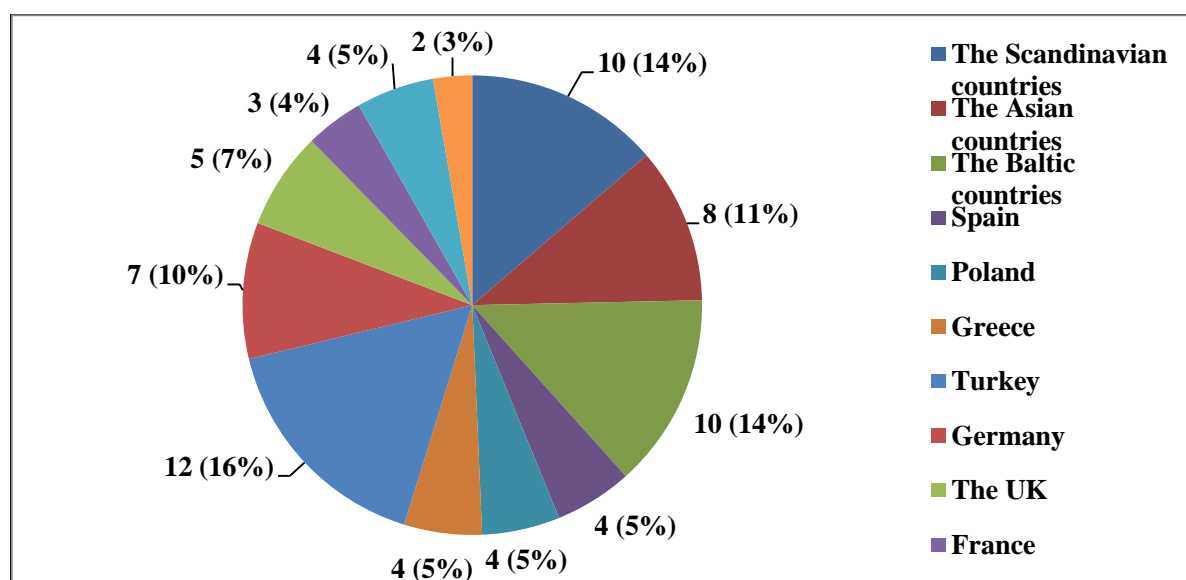


Figure 4. **Countries involved in virtual cross-cultural interaction**

The data of the survey demonstrated the diversity of the countries named by the respondents. The largest part of the respondents (16 %) chose Turkey as the target country for virtual cross-cultural interaction. The reason may be Erasmus+ Students' Exchange Programme, popular with KU students. Quite a few of the incoming students were from Turkey, so the face-to-face communication was transferred to the virtual media. The Scandinavian and Baltic countries were named by 14 % of the students. A slightly smaller percentage of the students indicated Germany (10 %) and Asian countries (11 %). The United Kingdom was named by 7 % of the respondents. The following numbers differed insignificantly

(from 5 % to 3 %), and they referred to such countries as Spain, Poland, Greece, Russia, France, and Italy, respectively.

Given the geographical location and the cultural characteristics of these countries, it can be seen that foreign languages play an important role in the virtual communication process. The interaction among the representatives of the indicated countries requires the skills of foreign languages. Therefore, the acquisition and the development of a second language skills are important for the process of virtual cross-cultural interaction.

Conclusions

The article presents evidence that the transition from the traditional to innovative teaching/learning methods in the context of a second language acquisition is obvious, and innovations have been increasingly actively applied by teachers to the study process. The possibility to update and upgrade the study process through the integration of innovative methods, such as virtual cross-cultural interaction, and tools, such as computers, smartphones, iPads, tablet computers, etc., into traditional methods has been actively considered and implemented by teachers in all higher educational institutions. Innovations have become a daily routine and the lifestyle of the youth, and this trend is typical of the entire world with its population actively engaged in virtual interaction via social networks.

Social networks involve people in the virtual social routine and “tweeting”, moreover, such activities can be characterized by certain educational advantages, such as the acquisition of a second language through a cross-cultural prism. Social networks are based on the following seven functional blocks: identity, sharing, conversation, groups, relationships, presence, and reputation which play an important role in the process of interaction and a second language acquisition.

The conducted survey and the participants' responses proved that the students were engaged in online interaction and that the activity was not a kind of innovation for them, but rather a daily routine. Furthermore, the variety of social networks and countries named by them demonstrated a wide range of virtual cross-cultural interaction and the necessity to use foreign languages and/or to acquire the skills of a second language. This method of learning a second language is definitely attractive and beneficial for the young generation.

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